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ABSTRACT

In 1991, eight schools received funding to carry out a 3-year locally designed family and community involvement project. This multisite collaborative action-research project aims to identify school policies and practices that obstruct or advance effective family-school-community partnerships. Data gathering and analysis are being carried out at two levels: in each school by a parent-teacher action research team and trained on-site facilitator; and by central research staff in Boston. Brief descriptions profile the eight schools and their projects. The experiences at Atenville Elementary School in Harts, West Virginia, illustrate the path followed by the various projects. Steps included: (1) defining goals and objectives; (2) moving beyond representation to meaningful participation by parents and teachers; (3) identifying new resources to meet expanding program needs; (4) moving from action to reflection; and (5) identifying remaining obstacles. Early outcomes suggest that action research can be adapted to diverse settings, can help schools identify important barriers to collaboration between parents and teachers, and can help schools identify unmet needs of children and parents. Action research schools are making decisions about parent and community involvement based on their own evidence of what works, and are moving toward coordinated and creative use of federal, state, and local funds. (SV)

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Action Research in Family-School-Community Partnerships: The Experience of One Rural Elementary School

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INTRODUCTION

Each week, it seems, a new report is released decrying the breakdown of our nations' families and communities. As the number of children suffering from the consequences of poverty continues to grow, so does the recognition that schools cannot address these problems alone. Families, communities and schools need to work together to respond to the complex needs of children. However, as recognition of the importance of collaboration between families, communities and schools continues to build, evidence of its impact on the academic and social success remains scarce (Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, 1990).

This paper describes how one rural elementary school is using its own research to assess the impact of their family-school-community partnerships. The school's progress to date shows that action research is a useful tool for improving parent and community involvement strategies and for triggering changes in school policy.

The Parent Teacher Action Research Project

The Parent Teacher Action Research Project is a multi-site collaborative action research project being conducted by the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) and the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning. The eight schools, which are part of the national reform effort, the League of Schools Reaching Out, received funds from IRE to carry out a family and community involvement project of their own choosing. The study, which began in the fall of 1991 and will be completed in the spring of 1994, is focused on four main questions:

1. How do schools choose and carry out their parent and community involvement projects?

2. What are the effects of school strategies and practices on children's learning, educator and family attitudes and behavior?

3. What kinds of policies and practices help and/or get in the way of school-family-community collaboration?

4. In what ways do policies and practices of school-family-community collaboration influence each other?

The goals of the study are three fold:

** To help practitioners and planners understand what interventions work, for what results and under what conditions.*

** To help others who may want to replicate or adapt such approaches to understand successful approaches to and difficulties of implementation and evaluation.*

* *To provide specific guidance to local, state and Federal policy makers who want to encourage family-community-school collaboration.*

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Overlapping Spheres of Influence

The study is based on a conceptual framework in which families, communities and schools are seen as having overlapping influence on the academic and social success of children (Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, 1990). According to this model, families, communities, and schools have both distinct and shared goals, philosophies, policies and practices regarding child development. The mission of the Center is to produce new knowledge on how family-school-community partnerships can be designed for maximum benefit by looking at the effects of specific interventions over time and in different contexts.

Policies and Programs

The Institute for Responsive Education is examining the relationship between policies and practices as an important variable on family-school-community partnerships. We define policies as aims or purposes which are codified through laws, rules and regulations, as well as the informal aims and objectives of individuals, groups of individuals or organizations. We view policies -- formal and informal-- at four levels: 1) national, 2) state, 3) city and school district, and 4) individual school and its community. These levels are seen as sometimes interconnected and overlapping, sometimes coherent and re-enforcing and sometimes contradictory or ambiguous. We see programs as the strategies and actions which seek to realize the intentions embodied in policies.

Typology of Family and Community Involvement Activities

Programs of home-school-community partnerships can be categorized into a six-part typology of family and community involvement activities. The six categories are: Basic Obligations of Families; Basic Obligations of Schools; Involvement at School; Involvement in Learning Activities at Home; Involvement in Decision-Making, Governance and Advocacy, Collaboration with Community Organizations (Epstein, 1992). The framework is an effective tool for examining the comprehensiveness of schools' approaches to parent and community involvement activities. In a comprehensive approach, multiple and integrated strategies are used to address the varied and changing needs of children and families.

COMPONENTS OF THE STUDY

Parent Teacher Action Research

Each school is required to form an action research team involving parents, teachers, the principal and a part-time facilitator (who is supported in part by IRE funds). The team meets regularly to discuss project progress and strategies for improvement. Our decision to use action research was influenced by organizational ideology and experience. IRE is committed to research which empowers individuals to define their own problems, gather facts and identify opportunities for action. In action research, parents and teachers, the individuals who are closest to children's needs, work together to increase the effectiveness of partnerships of their shared design.

IRE also is committed to research which has practical use for practitioners and policy makers in the field. Research on school practice traditionally focuses on end-results, with little discussion of how programs actually are implemented. We saw action research as a strategy for collecting useful data on obstacles and enablers to home-school-community partnerships from the ground up.

Finally our experience suggested that action research could encourage collaboration between parents and teachers. In a predecessor project (Schools Reaching Out), we used a teacher action research approach with some success. Action research proved to be useful strategy for involving teachers. We decided to add to both the risk and potential of the approach by adding parents to the equation. The action research approach is both a means to gather data and a model of parent-teacher collaboration to be studied in its own right.

Focus on the Relationship between Policy and Practice

The study's focus on the relationship between policies and practices of family-school-community partnership is unique. It is based in part on a survey of practices and policies of forty-two schools participating in the League of Schools Reaching Out. The survey revealed that many school initiatives remain disconnected from the growing number of district, state, and Federal policies aimed at supporting family and community involvement programs (Davies, Burch, Johnson, 1992). Also, the study underscored the impact of school policy, in particular the role of the principal, on schools' efforts to build home-school-community partnerships.

The present study extends this research through a close-up examination of eight schools' efforts to build programs with maximum benefits for children and families. Through action research, we hope to pinpoint the policies and practices which obstruct or advance effective family-school-community partnerships.

Methodology

The project uses two levels of data gathering and analysis: 1) in each school a parent-teacher action research team aided by a trained on-site facilitator and 2) central research staff in Boston.

School-based research teams are examining the effects of individual school interventions on children's learning, educator and family attitudes, and behaviors and school climate. Common school-based data collection strategies include: Documentation of school and community context, program implementation, student achievement data, and family involvement in school-related activities. In addition, school teams are surveying student, family and teacher attitudes and behavior and their views on program impact.

Central research staff complement school-based research through cross-site analysis of the two-way influence of policy and practice. Data collection strategies include documentation of project implementation and school, district, state and Federal policy context as well as interviews with building-level, district, and state educational policy makers, and program participants.

SCHOOLS AND THEIR PROJECTS AT A GLANCE

Anwatin and Northeast Middle Schools are located in Minneapolis, MN. Each school has an approximate enrollment of 800 students. Under a joint project initiated by Minneapolis Public School Staff and the University of Minnesota, both schools have created a team of parents and teachers to develop and evaluate new strategies for encouraging student success. Northeast's "strategy for 1992" was a program of sex education for the school. Anwatin's project involves creating direct communication links between home and school by installing answering machines and telephones in classrooms. Both schools are particularly interested in how strategies such as these can improve communication between families and the school.

Atenville Elementary School is located in the foothills of Appalachia and has an enrollment of approximately 209 students. One goal of the Parents as Educational Partners Program is to improve communication between families and the school. The school is reaching out to the least connected parents through a church-based parent center, a parent to parent phone chain, and home visits. The school believes that improving communication between home and school can have direct benefits for students. The seven member action research team is taking a close look at how the program is helping students and families by compiling portfolios on children's progress and their family involvement.

Fairfield Court Elementary School is located in Richmond, Virginia in the middle of two low-income housing projects inhabited by mostly single-parent families. Approximately 530 students (preschool - grade 5) are enrolled in the school. Under a three year grant from the Plan for Social Excellence, the school is crafting a comprehensive child development program for children preschool through grade 2. A team of home visitors (known as parent educators) visit parents twice a month, work with them on home-learning activities, connect them with community resources, and serve as classroom tutors one day a week. The school is interested in gaining parents' perspectives on the program's impact. Close to forty parents are keeping journals on their work with parent educators and its effects on their children.

Ferguson-Florrissant School District (Missouri) has begun a program called Boxes for Babes for families with infants age 10-24 months. The program is an off-shoot of the Parents as Teachers program, a nationally recognized early childhood and parent education model. Currently, seventy families are participating in the Boxes for Babes program. A team of parent educators work with moms on activity boxes which contain different toys and materials that parents can use with their children. The seven parent educators are the action research team. Using a prepared behavioral scale, the team is looking at the effects which the Boxes for Babes activity has on parents' interactions with their children.

The Samuel Gompers Fine Arts Option School serves approximately 547 children fourth through eighth grade. Located in southside Chicago, the school introduced a male mentoring program in the fall of 1991. A core team of fourteen mentors recruited from the community are spending a minimum of three hours a week working with students in and outside of classrooms. The goal of the program is to provide students with male and female role models in order to help students increase their self-esteem and academic success. The action research team is helping mentors take a close look at the effectiveness of particular strategies, e.g one-on-one tutoring, group work and home visits.

The Patrick O'Hearn School is located in a racially and economically mixed neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts. The school became a special integration model school in 1989. Children with severe disabilities from pre-schoolers to grade 4 and regular education children learn together in the same classroom. The school's home visitor project is one part of a series of programs designed to build parent involvement at the school. The home visitor team consists of parent volunteers who have received two full days of training and meet monthly to solve problems. Among other things, the school is looking at the impact of the home visits on the achievement of children kindergarten - first grade. The Family Outreachers (as the home visitors are called) are taking leadership over parts of the school's parent involvement program, e.g. drafting the parent involvement component of the school's improvement plan.

The Matthew Sherman Business and Government Preparatory School (San Diego, CA) has spent the first year laying a strong foundation for its home visitor program. The school serves over 1,220 students of which 85 percent are Spanish speaking. Bilingual parents were recruited as home visitors. In addition to parents and teachers, the Sherman's action research team boasts two students. The team is responsible for coordinating the parent involvement program which consists of home visitors, teacher training workshops, a parent center and the Organization of Latino Parents (OLP). OLP is a Latino parent organization and an integral part of the school's reform efforts.

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GETTING STARTED: Action Research in Family-School-Community Partnerships

In the first year of the project, participating schools faced common challenges, tested new strategies and began to document a number of interesting effects. The following section illustrates schools' early experiences with action research through the lens of the Atenville a located in Harts, West Virginia

Action Research is Unfamiliar Territory

What is action research and how do you do it? In November 1992, principals and facilitators from eight schools met in Boston for a three-day orientation and training conference. The Boston conference laid important groundwork but raised many questions such as "Who should be on the action research team?" "What is actually expected of us?"

To add to the challenge there appeared to be plenty of reasons why bringing parents and teachers together as partners in decision-making would not work. Anyone who had participated in previous reforms involving decision-making councils could warn of the challenges which lay ahead. For one, assessing program strengths and weaknesses is unfamiliar territory for schools. Traditionally, this job has been left to outside researchers. Now, an outside researcher (IRE and the Center on Families) was urging school teams to engage in the questioning process.

Defining Goals and Objectives

In November 1991, Atenvill Elementary School covened a research team to provide direction for the program and to study the program effects on student achievement, school-home communiciation and family and community involvement. The action research team is composed of three professional staff members, two parents. The action research team (ART) responded to the uncharted territory of parent teacher action research by defining their own specific project goals and objectives. Issues raised in meetings and memos focused on the role of action research team in relationship to other shared decision-making bodies within the school, how to identify indicators of project success, and disseminate information on the project school-wide.

The team determined that the role of the action research team should be to to coordinate parent involvement projects school-wide. School wide coordination of Atenville parent program includes activities such as planning school-wide parent involvement events, such as kindergarten registration or open house, considering ways to coordinate different kinds of activities, such as how housing reesource library on home learning activities in the parent center; and fundraising.

Moving Beyond Representation to Meaningful Participation

Defining goals and objectives enabled teams to take a first critical look at their projects. The majority of teams identified the need to increase participation of both teachers and parents in the action research process. Some teams anticipated the challenges of involving parents and

teachers in action research. At an early meeting, the Atenville Elementary School research team wrestled with ways of making action research process more meaningful to parents. They agreed that it was not enough for parent to sit it on action research team meetings. It meant making sure parents' voices were heard, their experience tapped and their concerns addressed. The team also afear was that identified the need for increased teacher participation once the project was underway. They did this not out of a sense of obligation but because they recognized teachers as critical to the project's impact on children's learning.

Creating New Opportunities for Parent and Teacher Involvement

Teams responded by creating new opportunities for parents and teachers to bring their skills to the action research process. Atenville offered teachers the responsibility of designing family portfolios to document changes in children that might not be captured in test scores. Other teachers are keeping a journals to record changes in student behavior. In a few instances, parents have taken on significant responsibilities within the project such as making presentations about the program at community and regional events.

Teams also took steps to eliminate obstacles to parent and teacher involvement in the action research process. When parents at the Atenville Elementary School made it clear that they found the use of acronyms like EMR alienating and confusing, the team outlawed the use of educational jargon at meetings. It also began offering child care and transportation to parents attending action research meetings.

Program Needs Outstrip Resources

Projects gained new momentum as parent and teacher participation increased At various points in the first year, teams perceived the scope of the project to be expanding beyond current available financial and human resources. The signs were in action research teams' increasing frustration over what they had time to accomplish and their limited resources for doing so. In telephone conversations with IRE project staff, facilitators relayed teams' worries of having their hands in too many pots. As Atenville's facilitator commented, "We just are at the point of getting more than a few parents coming to the school and already we're talking about setting up parent centers all over the county."

Resources are Within Reach

As the scope of projects expanded, teams began to identify the in-house and community resources which could help them meet their goals. The Atenville team began with an effort to run more effective meetings. A joint decision was made to curb the number of topics addressed at one meeting and create a time for individual progress reports. It also took the simple but important step of making sure that team members were informed beforehand of the meeting schedule, agendas, and activities via a newsletter.

Recognizing that the project was more than one facilitator alone could manage and gave key parents within the school full responsibility for running specific parent involvement activities. The intention was to build parent leadership for school activities and to free up the facilitator's time for targeted technical assistance and program coordination.

The team also identified new sources of community support for the project. To begin to eliminate traditional obstacles to parent attendance in meetings, arrangements were made to have meetings in local churches and community centers. The school has established an agreement with Marshall University to enable action research team members to recive college credit for their participation in the project.

The team has made new contacts with community organizations and state policymakers and agency representatives to provide staff development to team members, to convene community leaders for informational meetings about the project, and to lay the groundwork for future financial support. As a result of their efforts, the school is now collaborating with mobile health clinic, funded by the State Department of Health and Human Services, to provide services to some of the least connected parents.

Moving from Action to Reflection

At the outset of the project, the reflective half of action research seemed a burden to most facilitators and their teams. The demands of beginning a new project left little time for reflection. A number of schools saw red flags when individual team members began to report feeling overwhelmed, when tensions at team meetings rose and listening skills deteriorated. A few facilitators informed us that they could not and would not do it all (data collection work sheets, project facilitation, etc. . . .). Under mounting pressures, the reflection part of action research appeared to be an unaffordable luxury.

Simple Steps to Reflection

Gradually, schools have moved towards making critical thinking an integral part of the project. They have taken simple steps to make reflection easy and useful for schools. For example, one facilitator at Atenville undertook the responsibility of compiling and synthesizing the data from surveys and questionnaires into user-friendly graphs and summaries. reflection. With this structure in place, parent educators look forward to action research meetings as a forum for discussing specific problems, sharing stories and strategies for solving problems, and commiserating over common dilemmas.

The team's first strategy was to generate new information about the project which would fuel reflection. It began with a needs assessment to with a needs assesment of rveying parents about their needs and interests.having teachers, students, and mentors complete simple questionnaires about project impact. Other strategies targeted creating time and meeting space for structured reflection. Some schools formed subgroups of parents to do planning and coordinating so that there would be more meeting time for actual problem-solving. Atenville

Determining that reflection could be encouraaged with in a more informal and relaxed atmosphere, the Atenville team began to hold monthly meetings over dinner in a local restaraunt.

Obstacles Remain

Real obstacles to increasing parent and teacher participation remain. Teams identified the following challenges as key. One time rewards and incentives do not address the biggest obstacle to teacher participation: Time. Atenville's principal has tried to address this by being the only school in the county to uphold a district policy giving teachers planning time. Other schools see constraints created by teachers' contracts and district and state policy as outside of their control.

Teachers' low expectations of parents can contribute can be an important obstacle to change. Facilitators report some team members have raised concerns with regards to parents' substantive involvement in the project. To paraphrase one teacher, "How can parents identified as most in need of school services be a resource for this project? If they had that capability, they wouldn't need our project."

In other instances, teachers worry about the effects of parent involvement on job security. Some teams found that offering parents significant responsibility in the program was perceived as a threat by teachers and other school staff. Teachers and other staff ask, "If parents are allowed to do the work we have been trained for, e.g. curriculum planning, home visits, what does that do to the professionalism of our careers?" Both of these concerns may dissipate as parents and teachers continually define their respective roles and responsibilities together and recognize each other's strengths as complementary.

CONCLUSION

Despite these obstacles, we conclude that action research can help schools assess and improve their family-school-community partnerships. The study has the following implications for both policy and practice.

Implications for Practice

1. Action research provides a model for assessing programs that can be adapted to diverse settings.

We began the project with realistic apprehension about the difficulty of doing action research in school and community settings. The schools which we are working with face enormous challenges. They are located in communities affected by high poveryty, lack of social sevices, violence, substance abuse and other health problems. Some are plagued by high staff turnover. In addition, we know that school culture and traditions are resistant to action research. There is virtually no experience in many schools for working in collaborative teams of any kind,

let alone teams that are expected to ask questions, get answers, and plan action based on results of their inquiries.

While our expectations about the difficulties of doing this kind of research have been met, we are encouraged by schools' ability to adapt action research to meet the needs of their community. Action research teams may differ in size, make-up and function but a process for increasing program outcomes has taken root across geographically and otherwise diverse schools. Schools' growing investment in action research is evident in their efforts to (i) secure additional funds to expand the scope of action research (ii) share findings and process with other schools (iii) network with other schools around action research.

2. Action research can help schools identify important barriers to collaboration between parents and teachers.

While action research teams involve only a select group of individuals, the work of the team can identify obstacles to parent-teacher collaboration school-wide. Action research teams found their own efforts impeded by factors such as: lack of time on the part of teachers and parents, lack of physical space for planning and implementation, negative expectations on the part of parents and teachers with regards to each other's competence. Direct experience with obstacles such as these has helped focus school attention on internal barriers to parent-teacher collaboration. Three schools have taken steps to provide child care and transportation at school events. Other schools now offer incentives to parents such as free school lunch, small stipends and coupons. In the past year, every school has moved to increase space for parent involvement activities by holding events off-site event and by designating a room for parent center activities. Schools have responded to the need for teacher training and support by scheduling in-service training on parent involvement.

3. Action research can help schools identify the needs of parents and children which the program has not met.

A recent survey conducted by IRE revealed schools are inclined to take a narrow approach to parent and community involvement (Davies, Burch, Johnson, 1992). Their efforts will focus on one kind of activity, e.g. parent workshops or a homework hot line. In doing so, schools may be involving a narrow group of families who respond to one activity but not the other. Alternately, a comprehensive approach can help the school respond to the diverse needs of families.

Parent teacher action research schools are at varying stages of moving towards a comprehensive approach to parent involvement. Feedback obtained through journals and peer interviews has helped surfaced some of the "unspoken needs" of children and families. For example, parent to parent interviews at the Atenville Elementary School has helped less involved parents voice their sense of exclusion from the school.

Implications for Policy

There is early evidence that action research is changing in schools' parent and community involvement practices. However, the success of these strategies depends on the extent to which the policy context enables strategies to be sustained. With this in mind, we have observed the following policy developments across schools:

1. Action research schools are making decisions about parent and community involvement programs based on their own evidence of what works.

Action research involves planning what to do next and determining what should be dropped. We have found that unlike less effective project managers, action research teams have little patience for aspects of the project which seem to be going nowhere. In their decisions to revamp an entire project, to merge action research teams, to discontinue an activity, school teams are making decisions which place children and families' needs first.

2. Action research schools are moving towards coordinated and creative use of Federal, state and local funds.

When asked what is the greatest policy obstacle to family-school-community partnerships, principals are likely to point to lack of funds (Davies, Burch, Johnson, 1992). In the past year, the eight schools have worked to address this obstacle through coordinated and creative use of funds for parent involvement activities. Three have applied for school-wide project status which would enable them to use Chapter 1 funds for all children in the school. One is negotiating with its district to increase flexibility around the use of funds. Other schools are creatively tapping new sources of support, such as local businesses, the state department of human resources, and universities.

At the individual school level, we have identified additional shifts towards more family-friendly policies. For example, one school has introduced school-wide portfolio assessment. Their goal is to use an assessment strategy which responds to children's diverse strengths and which actively involves parents. Another school has adopted a policy that guarantees home visits to all incoming students, rather than those students labeled at-risk.

No matter what the reform, deep and lasting changes in practic and policy take time and much effort. Fortunately, parent teacher action research fits well with the complicated and sometimes conflictual nature of school change, Even strategies that do not work fr never got off the ground provide opportunities for learning and for redirecting the course of the project.

It may take schools more than three years to feel comfortable in combining research with action to produce meaningful change. But, news from the field suggests that they are ready for

the challenge. In the words of Darlene Dalton, principal of the Atenville Elementary School, "This isn't a two and a half year project. This is a ten year project. We plan to be looking for ways to help our children, today and a long ways down the road."

GETTING STARTED: Action Research in Family-School-Community Partnerships

	Obstacles	Strategies	Effects
Action Research is Unfamiliar Territory	How is our action research team different from our school decision-making council? Has anyone done this before?	Define objectives, measures of success relationship to other school initiatives	Team Formation Group Direction
Building Participation of Parents & Teachers	How can we get more teachers and parents involved in this project? How can we deepen parents' and teachers' involvement in this project?	Create new opportunities for parents and teachers: to design project materials, to receive training, to report on project, etc. Offer rewards and incentives: meals, child care, transportation and awards	Project Resources School Publicity Increased attendance at school activities
Program Needs Outstrip Resources	There is too much to do and not enough time to do it. What is most important here? Who can help us? Where can we get training? What's happening with the other projects?	Run effective meetings Share responsibility and the work load Identify new sources of financial and in-kind support, e.g. community organizations, businesses and university partners	Group Cohesiveness More time for reflection More money to do things
Moving from Action to Reflection	How can we think creatively about this project when we can't even listen to each other? Who has time to keep a journal?	Generate written feedback from project participants Host off-site retreats Delegate coordinating to sub-group Have facilitator share own notes with group	Action Plans Understanding of project strengths and weaknesses

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